

Political Mobilisation and Social Unrest in Rural Portugal in the Early Twentieth Century: the Example of Montemor-o-Novo between 1908 and 1918

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Abstract: This article studies the different expressions of political mobilisation and social unrest that occurred in rural Portugal during the early 20th century. To do so, it offers an investigation at local level, using as an example the municipality of Montemor-o-Novo, part of the Alentejo region, in the southern half of the country, and covers the years of unrest marked by the fall of the monarchy and the early years of the Republic (1908-1918). This research focuses on the analysis of three aspects: the acts of political mobilisation associated with the republican movement; the expansion of associations and conflict associated with the workers' movement; and the protests associated with the absence of basic foodstuffs resulting from the Great War. In doing so, the article aims to show how rural Portuguese population in the early 20th century played an active and dynamic role in the political and social life of the country by means of very different forms of collective mobilization (such as meetings, demonstrations, strikes, and riots), resulting from a wide variety of political, economic, or labour-related circumstances.

Keywords: Political mobilisation, social unrest, rural society, Portugal, 20th century.

In the 1960s, as a result of the process of decolonisation and peasant revolts in the Third World, and in particular, the Vietnam war, social sciences were marked by renewed interest in studies focusing on rural societies in general, and peasant conflicts in particular, whose echo can still be heard¹. In the case of Portugal, it was not until the "Carnation Revolution" in April 1974 that social studies once again began to explore rural societies, in an attempt to explain the phenomenon of land occupation carried out by numerous groups of rural workers in the Alentejo region in 1975, many under the auspices of the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP). Historians explored the different episodes of rural conflict that occurred during the 20th century in order to discover the historical origins of the conflict that occurred in the 1970s. Special attention was focused on trade union mobilisations and strikes by rural workers in the Alentejo

region throughout 1911 and 1912², when Portugal was undergoing another process of democratic transition as a result of the proclamation of the First Republic in October 1910.

From the 1990s onwards, new historical studies appeared on rural populations in general, and peasant conflicts in particular, from schools of historiography such as the New Social History and Subaltern Studies Group. The research produced as a result of this new interest in the topic has shown that these peasant conflicts were not always associated with workers' movements: on the contrary, peasant conflict had an identity all of its own, and was expressed through many different acts of protest and rebellion, many of which predated the definition of their class awareness³. In Portugal, these theoretical premises began to take shape in the early 21st century⁴, leading to the appearance of a number of interesting research studies on rural conflicts in areas of northern Portugal during the first half of the 19th century, which demonstrated that the rural Portuguese population was by no means distant from the political and social unrest resulting from the crisis of the *ancien régime* and the rise of Liberalism, but that instead, quite on the contrary, it played an active role in the social and political conflict that swept through the country, with numerous and varied types of mobilisations⁵. Despite the success of these studies, the theoretical and methodological concepts upon which they are based have not been used to explore the rural conflicts that occurred in Portugal at the start of the 20th century, meaning that the studies of reference on conflicts from this period continue to be those dating from the late 1970s and early 1980s.

In this text, we aim to contribute towards shedding light on this relatively unknown aspect of Portuguese social history, showing that on the contrary to the position defended by many of the country's academics for decades,⁶ the rural Portuguese population in the early 20th century was not only far from indifferent towards the political, economic, and social changes that occurred in Portugal and Europe, but that also, on numerous occasions, it played an active role in these changes, supporting major political mobilisations and social unrest that closely echoed the hectic public life of the country's large cities. We also aim to show that this mobilisation and conflict was not only limited to trade union action and strikes by rural workers, as defended by the majority of the studies carried out to date,⁷ but that instead it took shape in very different types of collective mobilisations such as meetings, demonstrations, strikes and riots, sparked by very different political, economic, and labour-related problems.

To do so, we have carried out research on a local scale, continuing with the premises of recent historiographic proposals ("local turn") which consider that the local/district scale is ideal for carrying out new studies into social and cultural history, as it is the main space for the historical experience of individuals, within which their political and social involvement takes shape and becomes tangible⁸. Also, as shown by micro-history, by carrying out a study at local

scale, it is possible to discover actions that would have otherwise gone unnoticed if we had carried out research on a regional or national scale⁹.

Specifically, we chose the geographical framework of the municipality of Montemor-o-Novo because, despite having a population of just over 22,000, during the years to which this study refers it had as many as three local newspapers (*O Meridional*, *A Folha do Sul* and *Democracia do Sul*), which will help to explore in greater detail the quantitative and qualitative aspects of numerous local mobilisations that would be overlooked if we only used government documentation from the national archives. These three newspapers, together with others from the city of Évora (*Notícias d'Évora*, *A Voz Pública*) and documentation from the Civil Government of Évora held at the Regional Archive of Évora (ADE), have served as the basic sources for this research project. Through this documentation, we searched for and analysed the main political and social mobilisations that took place in the area between 1908 and 1918, which served as an example to show how the rural Portuguese population played an active role in the main historical processes that marked the country during this decade: the downfall of the monarchy and the rise of the Republic, increased trade union conflicts (especially in the Alentejo region), and the profound social and economic crisis during the Great War.

1. A brief socio-economic description of the municipality of Montemor-o-Novo

Montemor-o-Novo is a rural municipality in the district of Évora, which together with the districts of Beja and Portalegre, forms the region of the Alentejo, which covers most of the southern half of Portugal (see map 1). In 1911, the municipality covered 1442 km² and had nearly 22,500 inhabitants. It consisted of the small city (and county seat) of Montemor-o-Novo (8,710 inhabitants), and other smaller parishes (Vendas Novas, 4,560 inhabitants; Santiago do Escoural, 4,140; Lavre, 2,460; and Cabrela, 2,430) which, in turn, include another smaller villages (Santo Aleixo, São Gens, São Romão, São Cristovão, Landeira...)¹⁰. The local economy was based on agriculture, especially cereals, which had spread over the south of the country from the end of the 19th century, favoured by the protectionist laws of 1889 and 1899¹¹. The exception to this predominantly agricultural economy was the parish of Vendas Novas, which had a more diverse economy thanks to the presence of the School of Artillery, leading to a large military presence in the area¹², and the presence of a large-scale cork industry¹³ that gave rise to a large industrial proletariat, known as *corticeiros* (cork workers).

Agricultural activity in this municipality was strongly conditioned by the large estates that characterised (and continue to characterise) the district of Évora. For example, in 1910, the average size of these estates was more than 10,000 hectares¹⁴. For this reason, a large

proportion of the social structure of Montemor-o-Novo consisted of rural workers, who scraped a living from working on a day-to-day basis for these major landowners¹⁵.

As has already been studied, the rural workers of the Alentejo region embarked on a series of major workers' mobilisations in the early 20th century that led to significant social and labour conflicts. The importance of these workers' movements in Montemor-o-Novo was such that the municipality has not only been the subject of historical research analysing the development of its workers' movement¹⁶, but also inspired one of the most important Portuguese novels: *Levantado do chão* (Raised from the Ground) written by the Nobel prize winner José Saramago.

Montemor Map

2. Long live the Republic! Popular mobilisation for and in defence of the Republic

On the 5th of October 1910, the Republic was proclaimed in Portugal following a triumphant revolution that only took place in Lisbon. In the rest of the country, the new regime was imposed on the basis of orders sent by telegraph. None of the interior regions of the country held acts in support of the revolutionaries, or any acts in defence of the royal family. The negligible influence the 1910 revolution had in the provinces led to the widespread belief that Portuguese Republicanism in the early 20th century was limited to the country's main cities, namely Lisbon and Oporto¹⁷.

However, if we shift the analytical focus onto a more local level, we can see that this image is not so accurate. Portuguese politics underwent a major transformation at the turn of the last century, ceasing to be a plaything reserved for the king and the respective party leaders, with the population becoming increasingly involved¹⁸. Within this context, the Portuguese Republican Party (PRP) moved away from its traditionally abstentionist strategy, and presented itself at the elections of 1899. The Republicans immediately realised the need to expand throughout the interior of the country in order to curry favour with new sectors of Portuguese society. To do so, Republican centres were founded as the cornerstones to create a political, social, and cultural network that would bring the public into contact with Republican ideals. They used the centres to organise propaganda events, mainly meetings and demonstrations, where Republican speakers –not without a certain dash of demagoguery– demonised the monarchic regime, accusing it of being corrupt and under the orders of the Church, and even showing support to workers, by denouncing social inequalities¹⁹. This strategy quickly brought about results in the Alentejo region and the PRP won a Parliament seat in the district of Beja in the elections of 1908 and 1910²⁰. Although the PRP did not win any seats in the district of Évora, its

candidates did have some successes: for example, it won the parliamentary elections in 1908 in the city of Évora²¹.

The spread of Republicanism also affected the rural areas of the interior of the country. In Montemor-o-Novo, a Republican centre had been founded in 1900 under the leadership of Joaquim Pedro de Matos, who a few months later in January 1901, founded the Republican weekly newspaper, *Democracia do Sul*²². In 1907 a new Republican centre was opened in Vendas Novas²³, and in 1910, just a few months before the revolution, a Parish Republican Committee was created in Lavre²⁴. These associations began to organise propaganda events, such as the anticlerical meeting held in Vendas Novas on 25 August 1909²⁵, which formed a part of the general anticlerical campaign supported by the PRP during this month, and which culminated with the meeting held in Lisbon on the second of the month, and which was attended by thousands of people²⁶.

Overall, the most important propaganda events of the PRP were the electoral meetings that were attended by hundreds of people. The last electoral campaign before the proclamation of the Republic was especially relevant in this regard, during the parliamentary elections in 1910. In Montemor-o-Novo, a first Republican meeting was held on the 8th of August at the *Teatro Montemorense*, attended by a “great number of persons, who quickly filled the stalls, balconies, and first-class boxes”²⁷. Shortly afterwards, on the 20th and 21st of August, a group of Republicans held meetings in the same town and in the parishes of Santiago do Escoural, Cabrela and Vendas Novas. These meetings were a great success, attracting up to 600 people in Escoural, including large numbers of workers. For this reason, and to win their favour, the Republican candidature in the municipality included António Moura, leader of the Association of Cork Workers of Évora, who did not hesitate to express his social ideas: “The working class, which produces everything, has the right to be free and independent, proud and dignified, and must react as quickly as possible to the threats and vendettas of electoral despotism which, by paying poorly for work, still seeks to exploit their conscience, obliging them to vote for the Royalist candidates”²⁸.

However, it is important to note that the political meetings held during this period were not exclusively Republican. Aware of the progressive importance of political events addressed to the masses, the Monarchists also organised public events that sought to attract the Portuguese people to supporting the King. To mark the crowning of Manuel the Second, local supporters of the Prime Minister João Franco organised public demonstrations of support that included the ringing of church bells, fireworks, and musical parades through the streets of Montemor, involving large numbers of local inhabitants²⁹.

After the rise of the Republic, similar popular demonstrations supporting the new political regime were held. On the evening of the 5th of October, when news arrived that the Revolution had triumphed, the first popular parades were held to the sound of *A Portuguesa* (at that time, the unofficial anthem of the Portuguese republicans), played by the local bands of Montemor-o-Novo. On the following day, the 6th of October, new mass demonstrations were held in support of the proclamation of the Republic, with speeches by local Republican leaders, music, fireworks, and green and red Republican flags³⁰ (whereas the flag of Monarchy was blue and white). Over the next few days, similar demonstrations were held in Cabrela, Vendas Novas and Santiago do Escoural³¹. From then on, the 5th of October became a commemorative date, when local authorities strove to revitalise the Republican spirit by holding popular demonstrations, which especially in the early years of the new regime, drew large numbers of people, although over time they gradually lost support, instead becoming an institutional holiday.

The climax of these popular patriotic demonstrations came with the victory of the Allies in the First World War, in November 1918. In Montemor-o-Novo, a large crowd held a spontaneous celebratory parade on the 8th of November, after receiving news of the defeat of the German Empire. Three days later, on the 11th, new demonstrations of support were held to mark the signing of the Armistice; and on the 12th, another popular demonstration was held to the sound of patriotic music, cheering the Republic, the Homeland, and the Army, during which the people performed a symbolic *auto-da-fé* and burned a dummy of the Kaiser³².

But despite this initial enthusiasm, the Republican regime was a period marked by a long series of political and social conflicts³³, during which the Republican authorities did not hesitate to mobilise their grass-roots supporters to defend the Republic.

One of the first aspects that led to instability was the worsening of workers' disputes that came about as a result of the new hopes³⁴ (or, as S. Tarrow would say, new "political opportunities"³⁵) brought about by the proclamation of the Republic. Specifically, Portuguese workers hoped that the new government would enact the social and political rights that the Republican speakers had repeatedly promised at the meetings held during the time of the monarchy. But this did not happen. The Republican governments never approved universal male suffrage³⁶ and although they did approve a law that legally recognised the right to strike³⁷, in practice this law placed so many bureaucratic obstacles in the path of organising a strike, that trade unionists referred to it as the "mockery decree"³⁸.

As a result, after the revolution of 1910, the wave of strikes that had been taking place in the country during the last months of the Monarchy worsened³⁹, leading to a social instability that many Republicans feared would affect the political solidity of the inexperienced regime⁴⁰.

In this context, the workers of the South and South-East Railway Company (*Companhia dos Caminhos de Ferro do Sul e Sueste*) began a strike in January 1911 to demand better wages and an eight-hour working day. This was the final straw. The Republican authorities decided to bring the conflict to an end, fearing that the paralysation of the south of the country would lead to widespread conflict. Claiming that the strikers had violated the recently approved Strike Law, as they had not given the government any prior warning, the supporters of the PRP formed volunteer battalions to take over the railway station, and to repress the picketers⁴¹. The authorities from the municipality of Montemor-o-Novo took the city's railway station without any major resistance, and "helped by many people from Santiago do Escoural" also took the platform of Santiago de Escoural and the station of Casa Branca (also close to Santiago do Escoural). "Suitably armed" groups of Republicans also arrived in the area from other parts of the district. To consolidate their support, the Republican centre in Montemor began to form a Volunteer Battalion comprised of "well-known Republican citizens" with the aim of "defending the Republic against any circumstances that may arise." Within just one week, the battalion had more than fifty members⁴².

A second source of political instability in the early months of the Republic was caused by attempts at armed revolts with the aim of restoring the monarchy, such as the one that took place in July 1912. Although the main revolts took place in the north of the country (in Chaves and Viana do Castelo), a number of important figures in the district of Évora were also involved, such as the Count of Ervideira, or Colonel António Rodrigues Montez Jr. The failure of this revolt was celebrated with numerous demonstrations throughout the whole country. One took place in Vendas Novas, where there was a torch-lit parade and music from local orchestras, who repeatedly played *A Portuguesa* with the participation of "sergeants, corporals, soldiers, and many people"⁴³. A few days later, there were disturbances in the same town, when local inhabitants booed a priest who had been arrested for his support for and involvement in the uprising⁴⁴.

The third major source of instability for the Republican regime came about as a result of the drift towards more authoritarian attitudes by military governments, such as that of Pimenta de Castro (between January and May 1915) or Sidónio Pais (between December 1917 and December 1918), which were marked by revolutionary coups and counter-coups (on the 14th of May 1915, 5th of December 1917, and the 11th of January 1919). The Portuguese population did not remain on the side-lines, and the Portuguese people took to the streets on several occasions to show their support or opposition of the different political options.

For example, one of the laws passed by the government of Pimenta de Castro was Decree 1488 of the 9th of April 1915, which authorised the government to disband any

administrative bodies who “took decisions or carry out any type of act that represents insubordination against the Executive Power, or which is aimed to incite insurrection against the measures taken by it”⁴⁵. Using this decree, the government of Pimenta de Castro shut down numerous local councils, such as in Évora, leading to mass demonstrations that ended in clashes with the police⁴⁶. Rumours also spread that the town hall of Montemor-o-Novo had been closed⁴⁷ and the authorities had to send the National Republican Guard—*Guarda Nacional Republicana* (GNR) to Santiago do Escoural to keep order while the new administrative committee took possession⁴⁸. Faced with the clearly authoritarian intent of these measures and of the government, sectors of the Democratic Party (the main successor of the PRP) instigated a military revolt to oust Pimenta Castro and restore the constitution of 1911. The victory of the coup on the 15th of May 1915 was celebrated in various parts of Portugal, including Montemor-o-Novo, Vendas Novas, Santiago do Escoural and Casa Branca, with popular demonstrations by “many hundreds of citizens”, including Republican supporters and members of workers’ associations⁴⁹.

The equally authoritarian government of Sidónio Pais was also affected by stability problems. The most important of these was the military uprising in Coimbra and Évora in October 1918. This political instability increased following the assassination of the “President-King” on the 14th of December 1918. In the north of the country, a military Junta was formed that demanded the new president, Admiral João Tamagnini, to impose new policies to make Portugal an authoritarian, presidential regime, thereby preventing the return to power of the Republican parties. The president refused, and the Military Junta of the North took a more radical stance until proclaiming the “Monarchy of the North” in January 1919, marking the start of a brief civil war. In this context, it took place in Montemor-o-Novo a popular demonstration organised by the municipality on Christmas Day 1918, to support the government against the disobedience of the Military Juntas, which “was joined by some common people, and a several spectators”⁵⁰.

And so, as we can see from the example of Montemor-o-Novo, the spread of Republicanism in Portugal in the early part of the 20th century was not only limited to the large cities. On the contrary, Portuguese Republicanism attempted to increase its popular support in rural areas by creating democratic centres that organised meetings and demonstrations. Despite the absence of universal male suffrage, these mass actions allowed the Republican lower classes of rural areas to take part in the country’s political affairs: before the 5th of October 1910, by showing their support for a new regime that promised new political and social freedoms; and afterwards, by supporting the political options that defended the Republic against a number of opposition groups.

3. Arise, ye prisoners of want! Trade union conflicts of workers from Montemor-o-Novo

As we have seen, one of the main sources of instability that affected the first Republic was the spread of workers' strikes. In the case of the Alentejo region, these strikes were mainly backed by rural workers throughout 1911 and 1912. Nevertheless, it is important to note that labour conflicts and workers' associations were nothing new in this region.

On the one hand, different types of labour conflicts had already occurred in the Alentejo region that could be considered as "less militant forms of mobilization"⁵¹. The traditional agricultural economy of the 19th century that predominated in the region led to frequently recurring employment crises in periods when agricultural work came to a halt, mainly during the winter, when hundreds of rural workers were unemployed for weeks at an end. During these periods, it was common for groups of rural workers to gather in public squares or in front of the town halls, requesting the authorities to act as intermediaries with the farmers so that they would hire the unemployed workers, or that the town halls employed them for municipal jobs⁵². These types of protests continued well into the 20th century: for example, on the 11th of December 1910, more than one hundred workers appeared at the town hall of Montemor-o-Novo, demanding that they should be hired or that otherwise, "they would go to steal acorns, for which purpose they would arm themselves as necessary,"⁵³ and on the 18th, a similar group of rural workers from Santiago do Escoural asked the authorities to intervene so that they could be hired by farm owners in the area⁵⁴. Similar demonstrations took place in the area in 1913 and 1914⁵⁵.

As regards workers' associations, in Portugal there were already significant numbers of friendly societies before the expansion of trade unions, not only in urban areas, but also in rural parts of the country⁵⁶. Montemor-o-Novo was no exception to this situation, and in 1901 witnessed the founding of the *Sociedade de Socorros Mútuos da Classe Operária Montemorense 1^o de Maio de 1901*, followed some years later by the *Associação Montemorense de Socorros Mútuos*, the *Associação de Socorros Mútuos Vendanovense* and the *Associação de Socorros Mútuos Cabrelense*⁵⁷. These friendly societies were especially relevant in the organisation of local workers' movements, both in quantitative terms, as they brought together hundreds of workers, such as the *Associação 1^o de Maio*, which had nearly 400 members in 1909, or the *Associação Vendanovense*, which had 150 members in the same year⁵⁸, and in qualitative terms, as they were the first associations to promote the culture of the workers' movement in the area. For example, they organised the first public May Day celebrations in Montemor-o-Novo, Vendas Novas and Santiago do Escoural in 1910 and 1911⁵⁹.

During the first decade of the 20th century, a number of new trade unions had also appeared. The first was the Cork Workers' Association of Vendas Novas, founded in 1904⁶⁰, which supported the first workers' strikes in the area. In March 1908, more than two hundred female workers from the "Herold" bottle cork factory began a strike to protest over wage cuts. After striking for more than a month, and despite having the support of other workers from the factory and other areas, the striking women returned to work⁶¹. The rise in labour conflicts amongst the cork workers of Vendas Novas came to a head on the eve of the proclamation of the Republic, in the midst of a debate known as the "Cork Question," where different sectors of Portuguese society debated the need to prohibit the exportation of raw cork oak bark in order to encourage the industrial development of the country. Against this backdrop, numerous cork workers in different parts of the country went on strike on the 29th of September 1910 in favour of this prohibition, considering that it would encourage the creation of new jobs in the cork factories.⁶² The strike had a significant effect in different parts of the Alentejo, including Vendas Novas, where the commander of the School of Artillery was asked to help the local governor to keep order⁶³. Notwithstanding the importance of this strike movement, the political upheaval brought about by the declaration of the Republic on the 5th of October 1910 meant that the strike was pushed into the background, although not forgotten. Once the new provisional government had been consolidated, the Portuguese cork workers (including those in Vendas Novas) resumed the conflict from the 1st of November, calling on the new government to endorse their support of the national cork manufacturing industry⁶⁴, with the result that the new minister of finance passed a decree on 22 November that imposed new taxes on raw cork exports⁶⁵. Throughout 1911, the cork workers of Vendas Novas were involved in new conflicts as a result of these taxes and other labour problems⁶⁶.

The importance of the Cork Workers' Association of Vendas Novas was decisive to create a Rural Workers' Association—*Associação de Trabalhadores Rurais* (ATR) in the town in December 1910, after the Republic had been declared, and which was one of the first unions of this kind in the Alentejo. In fact, one of the main speakers at the event marking the foundation of the ATR of Vendas Novas was Manuel Eduardo Moura, leader of the Cork Workers' Association⁶⁷. The ATR immediately began to organise trade union events in Vendas Novas, for example on the 1st of May 1911⁶⁸.

The main demand of the ATRs that were created in the region was to raise the wages of rural workers, because, according to one of the founders of the ATR of Évora, "rural workers earn 240 or 400 réis a day, working from sunrise to sunset, without this miserable pittance being enough for the daily needs of a family"⁶⁹. To support this, a number of rural workers organised the first agrarian strikes that took place in Portugal during the first few months of the Republic,

such as the one in December 1910 in Portel,⁷⁰ or in January 1911 in Veiros⁷¹, both in the district of Évora. Nevertheless, strikes by rural workers did not become widespread until May-June 1911, coinciding with the harvest, and in January 1912⁷².

The first of the conflicts in the spring of 1911 took place in Cabrela, in the municipality of Montemor-o-Novo, where on the 14th of May some two hundred workers met to protest for daily salaries of 520 *réis* between March and May, 500 *réis* between June and August, and 400 *réis* for the remaining months of the year. After a series of meetings between farmers and workers, it was agreed that the daily salaries would be 320 *réis* between January and March, 500 *réis* between April and June, and 400 *réis* for the rest of the year⁷³. On the 31st, rural workers went on strike in Évora, and in the first days of June, the conflict spread to a number of towns in the district, including Montemor-o-Novo, Santiago do Escoural and Vendas Novas⁷⁴. In all of these towns, due to the urgent need for workers on the harvest, they were able to convince farmers to accept an important increase in daily salaries. The success of these strikes also made it possible to increase the number of ATRs in the Alentejo, and in June 1911, these were created on Montemor-o-Novo, Santiago do Escoural⁷⁵, Lavre and São Cristovão⁷⁶.

However, once the harvest was over, the farmers began to repeatedly breach the agreements that had been reached, leading to new conflicts. In the middle of July, a group of workers from Cabrela staged a violent protest against the dismissal of a number of their workmates⁷⁷. In early September, there were agrarian strikes in Montemor-o-Novo and Vendas Novas for higher wages⁷⁸ and other labour conflicts in Santo Aleixo and Lavre⁷⁹. The most serious disturbances occurred in the Monte Branco estate, close to Cabrela, where local workers harassed and attacked labourers arriving from the region of Beira (in the north of the country) to work on the grape harvest, but accepting daily salaries that were lower than those agreed by the workers from Cabrela⁸⁰.

These breaches of wage agreements came at the same time as the arrival of the winter weather, leading to a new labour crisis amongst the rural workers in the district. By October, thirteen workers from the small village of Santo Aleixo occupied several areas of farmland, claiming that they needed work⁸¹. In December, workers from Santiago de Escoural rebelled against the labourers from the north who were working on the land of the farmer António Joaquim Marques dos Santos⁸². At the same time, workers from the villages of Santo Aleixo and São Gens staged a new round of wage disputes⁸³. On the 3rd of January 1912, the workers from these same two villages began a strike with the aim of being paid a wage of 400 *réis* by intimidating all of the workers who were charging less⁸⁴.

This conflict heralded the major strike that began in Évora on the 13th of January, which soon spread to other parts of the district, including Montemor-o-Novo and Vendas Novas.

According to the newspapers, more than 10,000 rural workers from the region arrived in the capital of the Alentejo. The authorities decided to take a tough stance, and closed the headquarters of the ATR of Évora, arresting a number of leaders. The reaction of the workers was unexpected. The strike spread, first to other working class sectors in the city, such as builders, cobblers, and cork workers, and then to other rural parts of Portugal, such as the Lower Alentejo (Beja) or Ribatejo (Moita, Coruche, Canha). The intervention by representatives of the Executive Committee of the Trade Union Congress—*Comissão Executiva do Congresso Sindicalista* (CESC) from Lisbon resulted in what had begun as a provincial strike threatening to spread to the capital. As a result, the district authorities decided to quash the roots of the strike in Évora, and on the 24th of January, the Civil Governor ordered troops and the GNR to break up the striking workers in the city. One worker was killed, and several were injured, as a result of this assault⁸⁵. Once again, this act of repression did not have the desired effects, and on the 29th of January a general strike was called at national level, which had a major impact in Lisbon and the area to the south of the city⁸⁶.

At the same time, rioting broke out again in Vendas Novas⁸⁷. The strike by rural workers in Montemor-o-Novo continued throughout the first weeks of February without any major disruptions, and negotiations between rural workers and farmers continued until early March. Their demands were finally met, obtaining salaries of 400 réis for men and 200 réis for women, except when crisis periods were declared, when their salaries would be reduced to 360 and 180 réis respectively, and at harvest time, when they would be paid 500 and 350 réis⁸⁸.

After the strike in Évora, the associative movement for rural workers in the Alentejo region continued to have a certain organisational capacity, encouraged by the propaganda meetings organised by a committee created by the CECs (close to Revolutionary Syndicalism) and led by Carlos Rates (who in 1922 would become the first general secretary of the PCP), which travelled around the towns and cities in the region during the spring of 1912, including Vendas Novas, Cabrela and Lavre⁸⁹. This campaign led to the organisation of two national rural workers' congresses, held in Évora in August 1912 and April 1913, and respectively attended by 39 and 68 trade unions, representing close to 12,000 and 25,000 members⁹⁰. Among them were delegates from several ATRs in the municipality we are studying: Montemor-o-Novo, Vendas Novas, Santiago do Escoural, Cabrela and São Romão. At this time, the ATRs from the Alentejo reached their highest number of members: for example, according to figures from the CESC, the ATR of Montemor-o-Novo had 400 members, Vendas Novas had 500, Escoural 450, and Cabrela 200⁹¹.

Despite this progress at organisational level, the capacity of the ATR from the Alentejo to propose social action was seriously affected by the harsh repression that followed the strike

in January 1912, and there is no mention of any new agricultural strikes in the Alentejo or in the municipality of Montemor-o-Novo after this date. The ATR in the town hall did support a number of actions in 1912, 1913, and 1914, but these would never be as significant as the conflicts of the summer of 1911 and in January of 1912. For example, in September and November of 1912, the ATR of Montemor-o-Novo presented a series of complaints to the local authorities for breaches of the wage agreements that had been reached at the start of the year⁹². They also presented complaints and organised demonstrations in the early summer of 1913 over the hiring of workers for the harvest, as farmers were offering 500 réis, while the workers were demanding 700 réis, reaching the point where the police had to intervene in order to defuse the situation⁹³. The ATR presented complaints for breaches of wage agreements once again in early 1914⁹⁴. They even proposed demonstrations for reasons that had nothing to do with the wage negotiations. For example, on the 2nd of June 1913, a national workers strike was called due to the “the abusive trade unionists’ prison.” This strike was backed by rural workers in the area, especially in Santiago do Escoural, São Geraldo, Santo Aleixo and São Gens⁹⁵. Months later, in October 1913, the ATR of Montemor-o-Novo presented its complaints to the authorities for the same reasons⁹⁶.

Overall, the trade union movement for rural workers in the Alentejo region experienced a sudden decline from the middle of 1913 onwards, especially as a result of harsh repression⁹⁷. The main sign of this decline was the sudden decrease in the membership of the ATRs. Between 1913 and 1914, the number of members of the ATR of Montemor-o-Novo fell from 400 to 350, while in Vendas Novas it fell from 500 to only 67⁹⁸.

In summary, Montemor-o-Novo was also the setting for the emergence of the workers’ conflicts that affected Portugal in the early years of the 20th century. A number of workers’ protests took place in the municipality, some of which were similar to those that had taken place in the region for decades, such as the demonstrations by unemployed workers who demanded jobs during periods when work was scarce; however, there were others that were associated with the new workers’ movement, which spread throughout the Alentejo at that time, bringing new forms of organisation (class associations) and protest (strikes). The most important players in this process were the cork workers, who were at the forefront of regional workers’ mobilisations in the latter years of the monarchy, followed by the rural workers, who after the proclamation of the Republic, played a leading role in the social unrest that came to a head with the agrarian strikes of 1911 and 1912.

4. *Our Daily Bread!* Protests against rising food prices and scarcity during the Great War

In the same way as in the rest of Europe, the outbreak of the Great War led to a food shortage in Portugal that resulted in steep price rises and a lack of basic products⁹⁹. Numerous protests against the lack of basic products were held throughout the whole of the country¹⁰⁰, including the Alentejo region¹⁰¹. Amongst all of them, Portuguese historiography has focused on the episodes known as the “Potato Revolution,” a series of protests and disturbances that occurred in Lisbon in May 1917¹⁰².

In the specific case of Montemor-o-Novo, the problem of rising prices of basic products at the start of the war¹⁰³ was exacerbated by a new crisis affecting seasonal work during the winter¹⁰⁴. Within this context, the local ATR continued with its prolific activity in defence of workers. At the end of December 1914, it created a workers’ committee that held a series of negotiations during January and February 1915, both with the authorities in order to discuss controlling rising prices, and with farmers, to encourage the hiring of unemployed workers¹⁰⁵. In July of the same year, the ATR created a committee to request the local authorities to create a Regulatory Commission for Product Prices¹⁰⁶, and at the end of the same month it organised a protest meeting against the rising cost of living, with the participation of representatives of the National Workers’ Union—*União Operária Nacional* (UON)¹⁰⁷, an anarcho-syndical organisation created in 1914 as the heir to the CECS, which had been the most important workers’ organisation in Portugal during the years of the Great War. In November, the ATR organised another meeting to protest against the rising cost of living¹⁰⁸ and created another commission, comprised of workers from Montemor and other villages (Santiago do Escoural, Cabrela), to protest against the prices that had been set by the municipality¹⁰⁹. The following month, it organised another meeting to protest against the rising cost of living, once again with the participation of representatives of the UON¹¹⁰, and on New Year’s Day of 1916 it even held a meeting to protest “against the cost of living, which every day further hinders the miserable existence of the proletariat”¹¹¹.

However, in January 1916 a wave of popular riots broke out in protest against rising living costs, mainly around Oporto and Lisbon, but which were also echoed in several parts of the Alentejo, especially the disturbances that took place in Reguengos and Évora¹¹². Many of these protests were similar to the food riots that were so common in Europe from the 18th century¹¹³. Once again, the municipality of Montemor-o-Novo joined in this wave of protests at national level, and on the night of the 31st of January, there were disturbances in Vendas Novas and Cabrela. In Cabrela, the rioters (“very many rural workers”) fired weapons at the police. A number of isolated protests were held in the municipal capital itself, where the rioters cut the town’s telegraph lines¹¹⁴.

Starting with these disturbances, a series of popular riots and demonstrations of varying intensity against rising living costs occurred until the end of the war, in the region and in the municipality. For example, in September 1916, the newspaper *O Meridional* refers to a “number of disturbances” in Vendas Novas because of the price of bread¹¹⁵ and in November 1916 the governor of Lavre requested the mayor to not order the shipment of the small amount of oil there was still in the village, to prevent any further problems¹¹⁶. In May 1917, almost at the same time as the “Potato Revolution” took place in Lisbon, a large group of commoners from Vendas Novas headed towards the railway station to prevent bread from leaving the area¹¹⁷. One month later, there were further “disagreeable incidents” in Vendas Novas, which forced the mayor to ask the main farmers in the area to sell cereal to the municipal district at a moderate price, in order to be able to make “municipal bread.”¹¹⁸ From the end of the year it was typical to large crowds outside the bakeries in Montemor-o-Novo waiting to buy a little bread, and where spontaneous protests broke out¹¹⁹. On the 19th of May 1918, a group of more than one hundred “workers and peasants” protested outside the administrator of the municipality against wheat being seized from the mills in the district¹²⁰, a protest that was repeated two months later on the 13th of July, when a crowd of local people met in front of a local mill to prevent the police from seizing flour “belonging to small farmers who had taken it there to be milled.”¹²¹

At the same time as these more or less spontaneous popular protests, the ATR of Montemor-o-Novo continued to organise orderly protests, either through workers’ committees who negotiated their demands with the authorities, such as requesting work¹²², or by holding protest meetings against the “rising cost of living,” such as those that took place in Montemor-o-Novo on the 17th of June and 26th of August 1917¹²³, and in São Cristovão and Santiago do Escoural on the 12th and 18th of August 1918¹²⁴. In the summer of 1918, a railway strike was also arranged, affecting the district of Montemor-o-Novo, and which was cut short by the government of Sidónio Pais, with troops taking over the railway stations¹²⁵.

In all of these trade union actions, there was the constant presence of representatives from the UON from Lisbon. Their aim was to make all of the necessary preparations to organise a day of national protest against the rising cost of living, by holding a large number of public meetings simultaneously throughout the entire country on the 15th of September 1918. However, the government of Sidónio Pais prohibited the meetings with the excuse of preventing the rise of Communism and the organisation of “soviets” amongst rural workers from the Alentejo region¹²⁶. This did not prevent the trade unions who had called for the meetings to hold events on the 15th at their respective headquarters, where they not only protested against the cost of living, but also against the prohibition by the government. This is what happened in the headquarters of the ATR in Montemor-o-Novo, Vendas Novas and Santiago do Escoural¹²⁷.

However, as would be expected, the refusal to follow the orders of the government led to a number of disturbances between workers and the police, and the situation got out of hand in Montemor-o-Novo. The mayor, accompanied by agents from the GNR, ordered the arrest of the three organisers of the event. The workers protested, and events took a turn for the worse: a policeman struck a worker with the butt of his rifle, and fighting broke out. The police shot three workers to death, several more were injured, and others were arrested¹²⁸.

The harsh repression of the meetings in September, which also spread to other parts of Portugal, radicalised the actions of the UON, which called for a general strike to protest against the cost of living on the 18th of November. However, despite careful preparations, the strike was a failure in most of the country¹²⁹. In the Alentejo region, the strike was supported by large numbers of workers in some parts of the district of Beja, such as the Vale de Santiago, where striking workers assaulted farmhands' houses and clashed with the GNR¹³⁰. Some authors have noted that the strike was also supported by rural workers in Montemor-o-Novo and Escoural¹³¹, although the documentation consulted as a part of this research does not allow us to confirm this, as there is no record of any conflict in the municipality during the days of the strike, which would seem to indicate that the bloody events of September served to quell social mobilisations in Montemor-o-Novo, at least until the end of 1918.

Conclusions

In the previous pages we have explored events in the municipality of Montemor-o-Novo in Portugal's Alentejo region at a local level, with the aim of studying and analysing the political mobilisation and social unrest that took place in rural parts of the country during the troubled years between 1908 and 1918, marked by the crisis and collapse of the Monarchy, and the establishment of the Republic. By analysing different sources, we have been able to see that an important number of inhabitants of this municipality took part in very different types and acts of political mobilisation and social unrest.

On the one hand, we have seen how Republicanism appeared in the municipality before it triumphed in the revolution of 1910, thanks to the creation of democratic centres that served to organise meetings and demonstrations of Republican propaganda, involving individuals from different social classes, including workers. After the triumph of the revolution and the establishment of the new regime, residents of the municipality continued to participate in political life by attending meetings and joining demonstrations in support of the Republic and the Homeland, organised for very different reasons: to commemorate the anniversary of the Republic, to celebrate the triumph or defeat of different coups and counter-coups that took place during the regime, or as celebrations to mark the Allies' victory in the Great War.

On the other hand, we have shown that the workers of the municipality of Montemor-o-Novo were already participating in the rise of the workers' movement in Portugal during the latter years of the Monarchy, when a number of friendly societies were created, together with the first trade union, created by cork workers. The latter supported the first strikes that took place in the municipality between 1908 and 1910. Following the announcement of the Republic, the rural workers of Montemor-o-Novo played an active role in the wave of strikes that spread throughout the Alentejo region, mainly during the late spring of 1911 and in January of 1912.

We have also shown that the popular classes of Montemor-o-Novo had not forgotten the traditional forms of collective protest that were common in the 18th and 19th centuries, such as popular riots. As a result of the food shortages resulting from the Great War, a series of popular demonstrations and riots took place in the municipality to protest against rising prices or the lack of basic foodstuffs. These conflicts were combined with modern mass actions (meetings and strikes) organised by workers' associations, also to protest against rising prices.

In summary, through research carried out at local level, we have seen how Portuguese Republicanism was not just a political ideology of the large cities of Lisbon and Oporto, but that instead it appeared at an early stage in rural areas in the interior of the country; we have seen how the rural population of southern Portugal was also aware of the new class ideologies associated with the workers' movement; and that although traditional forms of protest typical of the *Ancien Régime* still persisted, these were complemented with modern forms of protest and mobilisation that arose under the auspices of the new political and social ideologies. In short, through a local study, we have been able to show that country people from rural Portuguese society at the start of the 20th century were not detached from the political and social life of the nation. On the contrary, many of its inhabitants played an active, dynamic role in the different political and social contexts that affected the country during the troubled decade between 1908 and 1918, although it is true that their involvement was through a local framework where, at the end of the day, the historical experience of the individual occurred.

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⁹⁸ ADE, Governo Civil, E/Correspondência, Correspondência recebida, Caixa CX-68, Pasta nº 5, 31-3-1914.

⁹⁹ Manuel V. Cabral, "A Grande Guerra e o sidonismo (esboço interpretativo)", *Análise Social*, No. XV/58 (1979), 374-375; Ana P. Pires, *Portugal e a I Guerra Mundial. A República e a economia de guerra* (Lisbon 2011), 15.

¹⁰⁰ According to Fernando C. Brandão, *A 1.ª República Portuguesa: Uma cronologia* (Macao 2011), there were protests against the price of basic foodstuffs in August and September 1914; in March, May, and October 1915; in January, February, July, August, and October 1916; in April, May, July, November, and December 1917; and in April, July, and September 1918.

¹⁰¹ Jesús A. Redondo Cardeñoso, "Protestas populares por las subsistencias en el Alentejo durante la Gran Guerra, 1914-1918", *Ler História*, No. 70 (2017), 141-160.

¹⁰² António J. Telo, *O Sidonismo e o movimento operário português. Luta de classes em Portugal, 1917-1919* (Lisbon 1977), 114-118; Vasco P. Valente, "A Revolta dos Abastecimentos: Lisboa, maio de 1917", in Vasco P. Valente, ed., *Tentar perceber* (Lisbon 1983), 159-198; Luís A. Fraga, *Do Intervencionismo ao Sidonismo. Os dois segmentos da política de guerra na 1.ª República: 1916-1918* (Coimbra 2010), 249-257.

¹⁰³ *M*, 9-08-1914, 2; *DdS*, 6-08-1914, 2.

¹⁰⁴ *FdS*, 13-01-1915, 2; 20-01-1915, 1.

¹⁰⁵ *FdS*, 30-12-1914, 2; 6-01-1915, 2; 20-01-1915, 1; 30-01-1915, 2; 3-02-1915, 2; 24-02-1915, 2.

¹⁰⁶ *DdS*, 8-07-1915, 2.

¹⁰⁷ *FdS*, 21-07-1915, 1; 24-07-1915, 1; 28-07-1915, 1; *DdS*, 22-07-1915, 2; 29-07-1915, 2; *M*, 25-07-1915, 3.

¹⁰⁸ *FdS*, 3-11-1915, 2.

¹⁰⁹ *DdS*, 18-11-1915, 2.

¹¹⁰ *FdS*, 19-12-1915, 1.

¹¹¹ *FdS*, 5-01-1916, 1.

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- ¹¹² Luís A. Fraga, *Do Intervencionismo ao Sidonismo*, 858; Fernando C. Brandão, *A 1.ª República Portuguesa*, 244; Jesús A. Redondo Cardeñoso, "Protestas populares", 149-150.
- ¹¹³ George Rudé, *Paris and London in the Eighteenth Century* (London 1970).
- ¹¹⁴ *FdS*, 2-02-1916, 1-2; 5-02-1916, 1; *DdS*, 3-02-1916, 2; *M*, 6-02-1916, 2.
- ¹¹⁵ *M*, 17-09-1916, 3.
- ¹¹⁶ *M*, 5-11-1916, 2.
- ¹¹⁷ *FdS*, 16-05-1917, 2; *M*, 20-05-1917, 3.
- ¹¹⁸ Teresa Fonseca, "O Movimento Operário", 198-199.
- ¹¹⁹ *FdS*, 20-12-1917, 1; 22-12-1917, 1; 24-12-1917, 1; 27-01-1918, 1.
- ¹²⁰ *M*, 26-05-1918, 2.
- ¹²¹ *M*, 14-07-1918, 2.
- ¹²² *M*, 22-06-1916, 1.
- ¹²³ *DdS*, 22-07-1917, 2; 30-08-1917, 2; *M*, 24-06-1917, 1; 2-09-1917, 2.
- ¹²⁴ *FdS*, 15-08-1918, 2; 18-08-1918, 1.
- ¹²⁵ *M*, 21-07-1918, 2; 28-07-1918, 1.
- ¹²⁶ José P. Pereira, *As lutas operárias contra a carestia da vida em Portugal: a greve geral de novembro de 1918* (Oporto 1976), 41; Manuel V. Cabral, "A Grande Guerra", 388.
- ¹²⁷ *FdS*, 22-09-1918, 1-2.
- ¹²⁸ Teresa Fonseca, "O Movimento Operário", 203-207.
- ¹²⁹ António J. Telo, *O Sidonismo*, 209-210; Manuel V. Cabral, "A Grande Guerra", 388.
- ¹³⁰ Francisco C. Rocha & Maria R. Labaredas, *Os trabalhadores rurais do Alentejo e o Sidonismo. Ocupação de terras no Vale de Santiago* (Lisbon 1982).
- ¹³¹ José P. Pereira, *As lutas operárias*, 42-43; António J. Telo, *O Sidonismo*, 211.